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DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/FO, AND DRL

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGON](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: CHIEF ADVISER "GUARDEDLY OPTIMISTIC"

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) Summary: The Chief Adviser told the Ambassador on July 18 that he was "guardedly optimistic" that things were headed in the right direction. Fakhruddin Ahmed hoped that the United States and other major external players would do what they could to help his efforts to get the parties to endorse institutional reform. He reiterated Bangladesh's strong commitment against terrorism and promised to look into the question of possible U.S. human rights training for the RAB (Rapid Action Battalions). End Summary.

The Arrest Campaign

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¶2. (C) On July 18, the Ambassador called on Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed; Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Chowdhury also sat in. The Ambassador began the meeting by noting that he would be heading back for consultations and wanted to be able to reassure Washington that Bangladesh was on track to hold its national elections by the end of the year. Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed replied that the Caretaker Government was determined to stick to the timetable he had spelled out in April. He expressed concern that recent articles in U.S. publications suggested that many Americans did not understand the situation on the ground in Bangladesh. For example, the much ballyhooed arrest campaign had not led to a significant increase in the number of arrests in Bangladesh, which continued to average around 1,400-1,600 per day. Similarly, the number of prisoners detained in Bangladesh's prisons had only increased slightly, from about 85,000 to about 87,000. Almost all those arrested were being detained under court orders. Moreover, the Chief Adviser had ordered a review of all cases of individuals being detained under the Emergency Powers Rules: "We will either place charges against them or release them."

The Political Process

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¶3. (C) The Chief Adviser asserted that he was "guardedly optimistic" that Bangladesh was headed in the right direction. The Caretaker Government believed strongly that the country's political institutions and culture needed reforms, if democracy were to flourish in Bangladesh. Accordingly, the CTG had sought to strengthen and depoliticize the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Electoral Commission, and the Public Service Commission. Similarly, the Caretaker Government was moving ahead with sub-district (upazilla) elections, in an attempt to decentralize power to some degree. The question was whether the parties would

allow these reforms to move forward once an elected government returned to power. (Note: Within 30 days of convening, the new Parliament will have to endorse or reject the various ordinances enacted by the Caretaker Government.)

¶4. (C) Fakhruddin acknowledged that the parties' actions to date called into question their commitment to reform. They were putting up extremely unattractive candidates for the municipal elections occurring on August 4; many of the candidates were currently in jail on corruption charges. Fakhruddin asked that we pressure the parties to continue down the path of reform, including by fielding better candidates for the national election and by having the new Parliament endorse the institutional reforms enacted by the Caretaker Government.

The Optimal versus the Likely

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¶5. (C) Foreign Affairs Adviser Chowdhury suggested that the optimal way forward would be to have a government of national unity following the election, with each party holding the same proportion of ministries as seats in the Parliament. This would be one way of convincing Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) not to boycott the election, since the BNP would receive at least some ministries. Chowdhury admitted, however, that to date the Awami League, which expected to win the election, was not showing much interest in this formulation.

¶6. (C) The Chief Adviser acknowledged that there needed to be a plan B for moving the political process forward, in the event the parties rejected a government of national unity. With respect to pushing reform forward, he indicated that the CTG was considering the possibility of appointing a Constitutional Reform Committee that could provide proposals for the Parliament's consideration. With respect to getting the BNP not to boycott the election, he hoped that the international community would pressure the party to participate. He also agreed that there would be some pressure on Khaleda Zia from the many politicians within the party who hoped to win seats in an election. Unless the government gave in to all the BNP's demands, Khaleda Zia's party was unlikely to come to a decision on whether to participate until the last possible moment before the national elections were announced, i.e., sometime in late October or early November.

Transferring Wealth to the Rural Areas

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¶7. (C) The Ambassador noted that the Bangladesh economy appeared to be weathering both national disasters and rising global food and fuel prices relatively well. The Chief Adviser agreed, but warned that poorer Bangladeshis were being hit hard by the price increases, despite the safety nets the Caretaker Government had put in place. Still, there was a silver lining to this cloud: rising prices for food meant that, for the first time in decades, Bangladesh's farmers were seeing their incomes increase more rapidly than those of urban dwellers.

Bangladesh Committed to the Struggle Against Terrorism

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¶8. (S) The Chief Adviser expressed particular dismay over recent articles in the U.S. media that had portrayed Bangladesh as being soft on terrorism. He stressed that his government was determined to do everything possible to root out terrorism and had taken concrete steps such as outlawing the HUJ1-B and arresting a large number of terrorists. The Ambassador replied that the United States viewed Bangladesh as a valuable partner in the War against Terrorism; the U.S. Mission received excellent cooperation on counter-terrorism from the concerned GOB agencies.

Working the Rapid Action Battalions

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¶9. (C) To further strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, the United States was interested in seeing whether it was possible to provide training to the RAB, the Ambassador continued. To do so, however, would require some improvements in RAB's transparency and accountability with respect to human rights questions. A team from Washington had been in Dhaka and had had good conversations with RAB on this issue. In the team's final meeting, however, the Home Ministry had indicated that there would be no changes in current practices. The Chief Adviser heartily endorsed the Ambassador's comment that he would not take this negative response as the final answer. Fakhruddin agreed to look into the matter and also noted that he hoped that the National Human Rights Commission would help address issues such as alleged violations of human rights by RAB, once the NHRC was stood up in September.

Comment: On Track for Now

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¶10. (C) The Chief Adviser appears committed to stepping down by the end of the year - and leaving a stronger democracy behind. He understands that he might not get everything he wants in terms of reform but similarly understands that a return to the scorched earth politics of 2006 would be disastrous for Bangladesh. We should do everything possible to help Bangladesh's major political parties grasp this fact.
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